What is witchcraft?

* A general agreement hasn’t been reached on what witchcraft was, or might be
* There are about 3 defintions that can be used to understand witchcraft

New Englanders definition

* Early colonists defined witchcraft as “the use of supernatural power, usually but not always for harm”
* Some witches were considered healers
* Using their powers for good

New Englanders definition (cont.)

* They believed some humans were darkly unnatural and possessed supernatural abilities
* Accused witches were said to abuse their powers by wreaking havoc on the community
* The motive for why witchcraft was used was how the term was defined

Puritans definition

* “understood witchcraft as a relationship between a human being and the devil”
* Looked for evidence of this relationship
* By telling Puritans of the pain they felt when warding of Satan’s attempt to lure them they gave useful evidence for their definition

Modern Definition

* historians believe New England witch-craft as a way to express social and cultural anxieties among accusers rather than the harm the accused was accused
* gender, religion,and psychology lent bias to deciphering the meanings of witchcraft

How did they determine who were witches?

* People saw them performing witchcraft
* They admitted to it

How did they determine who were witches (cont’d)

* “familiars” are given to them by the devil
  + Small animals that wreaked havoc on the surrounding population
  + Exclusively British

How did they determine who were witches? (cont’d)

* Tying someone up and throwing them into the water
  + If they sank?
    - They weren’t a witch, but they were dead!
  + If they floated? (like a cork)
    - They were a witch!
    - Most of the time, the accused person would struggle and flail around in the water so they’d break free and swim to the top of the water anyway

How did they determine who were witches? (cont’d)

* If they had a “witchmark”
  + Anything like a mole, wart, or discoloration of the skin
* The “witchmark” was considered to be where the devil touched them
  + Someone would poke them with a needle-like object on their “witchmark” and if they felt no pain then they were said to be a witch
    - If they bleed then they were innocent

How did they determine who were witches? (cont’d)

* If someone was of a low social status then people sometimes thought that they could be a witch
* Usually, witches were women
  + Few exceptions
* If someone was a studier of medicine, then people thought that they might be a witch

Punishing Witches

* The traditional punishment for convicted witches was being burned at the stake. This started in Europe in the witch era.
* England was known for hanging their witches as well as burning them.
* Though England forbade it, Scotland sanctioned the torturing of witches in order to receive confessions.

Punishing Witches cont.

* Torturing methods included
  + Forced walking or running
  + Starvation
  + Sleep deprivation
* Pressing, the act of putting a board of the body and putting weight on it, was also used.

The First Witch Trial

* Occurred in Chelmsford, Essex England during 1566
* Came about as a result of pressure from the church
* The first trial to be written up in a pamphlet
* Elizabeth Frances used a cat to inflict harm on Agnes Waterhouse and her daughter Joan
* Elizabeth was found guilty and put in jail while Agnes was hung

Salem Witch Trials

* Occurred in Salem, Massachusetts
* 1962-1963
* 200 were accused of witchcraft and 200 were put in jail
* Tituba, Sarah Good, and Sarah Osbourne were accused of witchcraft and thrown in jail due to Tituba’s confession